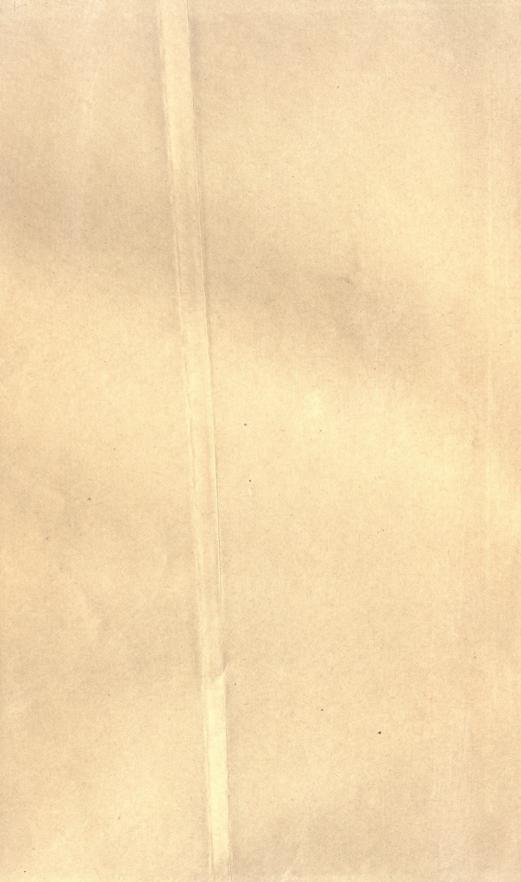


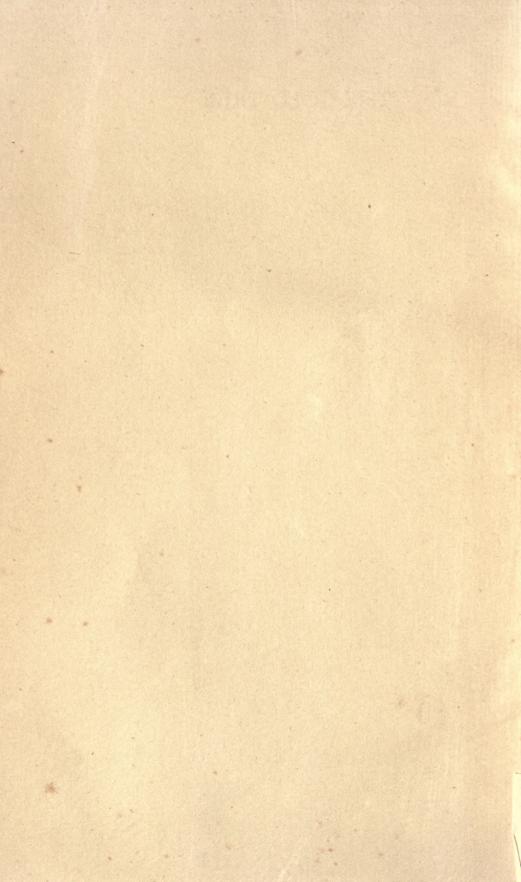
The Gold Tree

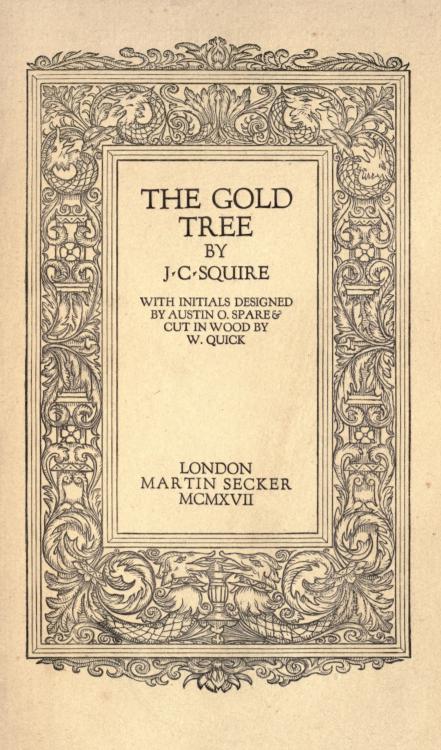
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THE GOLD TREE

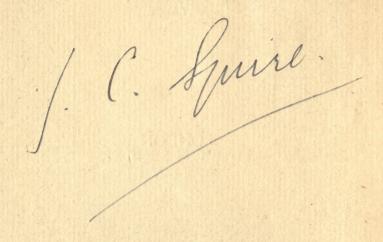




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TO MY MOTHER



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THE GOLD TREE





LL the years I was there I had a room with Gothic windows, very high in the great old building. When the leaves were out there were no roofs or walls within sight, and the room was so high that, seated at my window, I was almost on a level with the uppermost large branches of a vast

spreading elm, which stood right over against me and dominated all the other trees in the thickly-wooded gardens. When one was by the farther wall of the room the moving green caves and promontories of the great tree filled the whole space of the window; but leaning on the sill one saw it framed in sky with copses

and walks stretching away behind it.

I spent many hours watching that tree when, as often happened, I was feeling too indolent for other occupations. In bleak winter twilights, when its extended branches rose in dark austerity amid the cold and wet, or toughly struggled with a fierce wind, I saw it a self-reliant Titan, a vegetable Prometheus, a dumb and vigilant spirit without hope and without fear as the tempests swelled and the menacing darkness came round. When spring thrust away winter, and the clustered crocuses, yellow, purple, and mauve, shone in the grass about its foot, faint delicate veils spread over its branches, veils of buds which presently broke forth into leaves. In summer it was a great palace for birds. The rooks tumbled about its pin-

nacles at earliest dawn, and then it became alive with the chatter of little birds, which made its bushy wall sway and bulge and break as they swarmed in and out. Usually when the edges of the western leaves shone with sunset red, a companionless thrush sang there fitfully and poignantly; and I would listen, wide-eyed and quiet, forgetting time. Most of all, the great elm was beautiful in the autumn, when it was clad in a glory of rich colour, the magnificence of the fulfilment that precedes death. But in all the autumns save the first I took little pleasure in it, and could not look at it without a vague aching at the heart.

Nature, that first autumn, must have struck some happy and subtle equilibrium of sun and wind and rain. Perhaps never since that great tree's third progenitor was a sapling and the mortar was fresh on the college walls, had just that unheralded miracle been achieved by just that impalpable balance of heat and atmospheric pressure, of moisture and light. I did not speculate about this; I had no inclination to dissect the beautiful thing I saw. But every morning I woke with the marvel gently waving before my eyes, a tree of pure and stainless gold; and every afternoon, when all around the walks and lawns were tranced in lucid stillness, I sat on my sill and gazed at the transfigured multitudes of leaves.

At first the tree's garment was thick and profuse. It lay, one would say, in mounded waves and beaches, still slightly stained with remembrances of the late summer, the dry dark greens and soiled dusty browns. Now and then leaves fell. Each day there were more of them scattered on the level grass around the roots; but for two or

three weeks the dense masses of foliage on the branches appeared undiminished and unthinned. Then, with swift though imperceptible gradation, as October wore on, the

change came.

One afternoon I saw with a sudden joyous pang that the tree had changed into something more beautiful than anything I had ever seen in my life. Chinks of sky were everywhere visible between the twigs, and the leaves had all gone a uniform gold. It was not the heavy gold of opulent stuffs from Italian looms; it had no tinge of brown or crimson. It was splendid; but the splendour was pale and pure and spiritual. Here, in an immense complex pattern, were thousands of leaves of ethereal gold. They were all thin and smooth and perfectly shaped. They were all distinct; yet they seemed, though so clear and finely edged, weightless and insubstantial. The tree was a vision of that perfection that dwells always as a longing in some recess of the soul, and that is scarcely ever realised in any material embodiment. So for seven days it remained.

Nothing marred it. Every day was mild, radiant, exquisitely peaceful; the sky was of that clean autumnal blue which has something of the quality of silver, the shining blue that in the fall of the year broods maternally over all tranquil places, the remote yet consoling blue that is closest to the spirit of old gardens and moss-grown statues and fountains forgotten by man. Hour by hour I sat staring at the gold against the far azure; and the only motion visible was the gentle motion of the leaves that fell like great gold petals. They seemed to fall quite evenly and rhythmically; one by one, without hurry, they floated

gently down through the windless air with a slow continuous magic that made an almost intolerably wonderful harmony with that other magic of the motionless lovely colour. Twilight came over, and dimly I could see them falling still; and when night closed in and the tree was a confused web against the starry spaces I knew that they still fell, evenly and rhythmically, like great petals, floating down to death.

The gold leaves became sparser. The spaces of sky became wider. Each leaf was outlined vet more clearly and definitely against the silvery blue. Perfection was perhaps most perfect when the leaves on the ground far below lay in such heaps that those on the boughs stood out each a single paten of gold with a frame of blue between it and the next, but still a host in number. Their fragile and ravishing beauty breathed such tenderness that involuntary tears came to my eyes and my lips trembled. For this was the most beautiful thing in the world, and as I gazed it was passing away.

A night came when the wind rose and the leaves with no resistance were swept down in flying companies. Next day a few golden stragglers alone clung to the bare boughs. the dishevelled remnants of a great army that had gone along its road. The tree of spiritual gold was no more; there remained a hard great tree strong to battle with the iron winds of winter. Beauty, supreme beauty, had died; and why had the heart survived it? There was a vague aching in my breast as with fixed and filmy eyes I gazed unseeing out of the window, over the forgetful paths and lawns, to a world man never sees, but the nature of which he sometimes obscurely apprehends through fragmentary symbols.

In none of the other autumns was the tree of gold to be beheld. The hues of the great elm's vesture were year by year luxuriant and gorgeous, but the pale and even and stainless gold did not come again. The excitement of expectancy was always followed by the depression of disappointment; I grew to feel that what I had seen once I should not see again.

But may it not be, perhaps, that when I am an old man, near my grave, I shall some day wander into the gardens below my old window, and find a second time the tree of gold, still and perfect, under a consoling

autumnal sky?



THE WALLED GARDEN





NCE upon a time, in a country where they spoke English, there lived a king. He was a very dull fellow with a countenance like the face of a clock, but he had an excellent cook. So good was the cook that they conferred upon him the title of Gastronomer-Royal, and gave him a salary equal to £2,000

a year, reckoning, that is, not according to the nominal value, but to the purchasing power of the money. The cook, when middle-aged, had married a daughter of the keeper of the Great Seal; but she unhappily was one day killed by that ferocious animal (it was as large as a walrus). when visiting her parents, and left her husband a widower with an only son, a small boy who spent much of his time wondering about vain and foolish things. He wondered, for example, why he often heard of aeroplanes turning turtle, but never of a turtle turning aeroplane; and also why it was that no one ever threw a third or a quarter of a brick at anyone else. But to do him justice these puzzles did not always occupy his mind; and sometimes when he was straying, as the Gastronomer-Royal's son was allowed to do, in the gardens of the palace, he would think seriously of his own future.

In the king's gardens there was one little walled garden which faced south. Entering through a door in the north wall you found flower-beds, full of red and yellow tulips, in front of you, and flat fruit trees on the walls to

right and left. And if, amid the heavy and forgetful scents of the flowers, you walked down the garden, over the close turf between the beds, you came to the south wall, in which was a doorway. In this doorway there was no door, but only a little green wooden gate, breast high; and beyond the gate a flight of a few steps led down to a brown river, narrow, but deep and swiftly flowing. Smooth boulders divided the current; and under the farther bank, where dense foliage grew, there were dark pools into which the quiet fish darted when a shadow frightened them. "O swift dark water, O little trails of foam, O wavering light on the old stones under the branches, you are part of me, you stream from my heart, and though I see you through my eyes you are always in my breast." So the boy would have spoken had his feelings bred thoughts that might be framed in speech.

He did not know what his feelings were. He was not conscious enough of them to formulate them; and many a summer's day when the bees hummed in the garden and swift birds in the blue sky threw fleeting shadows on the earth, he sat on the steps staring at the river thinking about what he would do when he was a man. He did not intend to be a cook, even although his father's influence might secure him the reversion of the high post he held. But what should he be? Should he serve his country in a peaceful way as a public official, rising at last, perhaps, to be the monarch's chief adviser? Should he become a lawyer and wear a wig? for he had always had the better of his young companions in argument, and he thought that, were he given fair opportunity, his vehemence and brilliance in court would carry all before them. Commerce he scorned,

though he would play with the idea of commanding a trading vessel and exploring islands in remote seas; until he remembered that the sea always made him sick. In the end he returned constantly to dreams of military fame. Sir Richard, the Commander-in-Chief, appeared before his imagination, blazing in burnished steel and trotting down the line with his lips set and his eyes flashing command. There lay his destiny and there a life gleaming and full.

At a suitable age he entered the army. He was enthusiastic about his profession and was so fortunate as to go through three very sanguinary campaigns before he was twenty-five, one battle alone being memorable for the fact that no fewer than a hundred thousand men perished on each side, the result being indecisive. For a daring and successful disobedience of orders in this action he was reprimanded and promoted; in the next war he was again promoted; in short, he became a field-marshal at an age unprecedented in that country or in any other. His alertness and modesty gained him general respect, and even affection; and his simple-minded concentration on his work made it inevitable that when the aged Commander-in-Chief died he should succeed to the vacant place.

For many years he headed the armies of that country in the field. His hair was grizzled and his face red and wrinkled with exposure. None of his men underwent more hardships than he; and when a stray shot maimed him so completely that further active service was impossible for him, all his fellow-citizens, in praising his magnificent career, shook their heads and said that he would eat his heart out now that he was on the shelf.

They were perfectly right. It happened that one day

when hobbling through the gardens of the palace—for, an honoured pensioner, he had been allotted a suite of rooms next the king's own apartments—he came to a doorway in a wall and went through into a sunny garden, walled around and full of flowers, and having at the far end a little gateway with steps leading down to the river. His heart moving strangely within him, he limped over the grass, helped by his stick, and came to the gateway and opened the gate and sat slowly down on the steps, an old man who had been a boy. There in silence, as the calm swift river rushed by, he looked on the water and the stones and the overhanging boughs. They had remained unchanged and so had he; but his body had grown to its prime and decayed. He thought of his youth, of the years of warfare, of swords flashing, of tumultuous shouts and curses, of midnight marches through torrential rains, of entrances into conquered cities, of triumphs given him by his own people. The names and faces of hundreds of men came back to him; of not one of whom could he truthfully say that the man had understood him. All the great successes had stirred him inwardly as much and as little as the capture of a butterfly had stirred the boy. Life at one period had been as life at another period; mostly tedious, sometimes melancholy, at moments just a little exciting; no period more than another had been immune from disappointment, boredom and heartache, impatience at men's stupidity and pettiness, contempt of clamour, and doubts about justice and injustice. As the long scroll of memory unfolded he felt that he had walked all his manhood among phantoms; and he derived no pain from the reflection that his friends were dead and he himself already half-forgotten, save as a legend. For he knew, watching the stream, that it would have been better had he remained all his life in that garden with that river which did not change. The fountains of speech, now he would willingly converse with the river, were rusted and choked; why, when he was young, had they been sealed? Why had he been compelled to go round the world to find himself?

As he emerged from the garden, hobbling through the door on his stick, and peering forward with sorrowful eyes, he was seen by a young poet, skilled in the diagnosis of diseases such as his. Touched with pity, and anxious to exercise his skill on so tragic a subject, he wrote a long poem in which he tried to express what he saw in the old man's heart. It was not a very good poem, and most of the stanzas were of this kind:

Moveless we climb, we rise yet stand we still,

New orbs of men we pierce, yet are the same;

Though fates like Alexander's we fulfil,

And tread a blinding pinnacle of fame,

Fame dwells within us; in our hearts the chill

Rests; as of old unconquered is the earth;

Empty is speech, in deeds there is no worth

And nothing in a name.

In another verse the poet declared

Evil is in the world; a sinister scales

Trims in the heart of each; it never fails

To keep its balance sure.

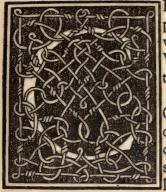
And as the young man was a poet, and, consequently, vain about his occupation, he had some verses like this:

No man has many friends; by Space and Time
We are limited, and by our narrow hearts.
In spite of cozening rune and glozing rhyme
There is no wider kingdom than is Art's.
Man's love, unsuccoured by her arm sublime,
May not encompass much nor speak to many;
Her aid, her aid alone it is that any
Diviner power imparts.

O you who have despised but never sung,
Who have superbly hated, swayed and striven:
This bitter immortality of the tongue
Can you in last clear vision deem it heaven?
Even as you conquer, are they not outwrung,
The last weak drops of the sponge of happiness?
Would you not rather have dwelt in idleness,
In full oblivion even?

But all that, you may possibly say, sprang from the bias of one who was not naturally a man of action.

THE MARCH OF PROGRESS



HRIST, as yet, was not even a prophecy; and the races which were to fight in the Trojan War had not reached the Mediterranean. . . .

It was the day of the Sun-God's festival in the capital city of Atlantis, and since dawn the crowds in the streets had grown steadily denser, and all the roads leading in from the country dis-

tricts had been choked with carts, filled with holiday makers and decorated with branches and fillets of wool. As midday approached the multitude of men and women who lined the miles of the Temple Way, each clad in white, and wearing the yellow disk which was the sun's symbol hung by a chain around the neck, were pressed together to the point of suffocation; and the chatter of their voices made a noise like that of rolling waves. The Sun-God himself burnt fiercely from a quivering sky, pale towards the zenith, but very blue over the flat roofs and the trees. The Way was straight and broad, and paved with wide, white blocks of marble; and the erect soldiers, spears at rest, whose motionless brass-protected bodies kept back the heaving masses behind, could, when they turned their heads, see at the far southern end of it the massive square buildings of the Temple, and, behind the Temple, the middle and upper courses of a gleaming white pyramid, as high as a small hill.

On that pyramid, at the third hour after noon, the High Priest was to cut, with an obsidian knife, the throats of six young men and six girls. These had been, according to custom, chosen from amongst the most physically perfect of their age in the whole Empire of Atlantis. Their flesh would be cut; they would bleed to death on that high altar; their bodies would be burnt; and the day would end.

Three men stood on a balcony over the tall portico of a villa overlooking the tumult. The heavy square pillars of the portico, covered with bright geometrical patterns, stood right on the road; the other three sides of the house were surrounded by a large garden, full of trees. Two of the men were middle-aged, one tall, lean, and determined-looking, the other shorter and corpulent; but the third was a youth. His dark hair was tossed back from a bony face; his eyes were deep set and intense, and his lips broad and sensitive. Many of the little faces below turned up towards them, for they were well-known and of the nobility; but they themselves looked out over the roaring crowds and the broad road that drove far to the left and right with eyes for no individual in the scene. All the city, except only the public buildings, was of one-storied houses; trees were plentiful; in the distance to the south was the mighty group of the Temple-buildings; to the east the horizon was cut by the line of the monolith that stood in the royal gardens; and in the haze of the distance straight in front of them, over the miles of roofs and a short interval of plain, they could just see a gleam or two of water and a dark little patch that they knew to be the assembled masts of hundreds of ships in the port. In the splendid light the panorama was opulent, settled, inspiring. It looked as though nothing could disturb it. The tall man grasped the parapet with his hands and his gaze ranged the prospect with an 20

energetic complacency. "Well, Colcan," he said to the young man, "we of Atlantis have something to be proud

of. Civilisation can scarcely go much farther."

Colcan the poet was leaning on his elbows, looking thoughtfully and with an expression that was hardly as happy as the occasion justified, at the unending crowds. He did not turn whilst he replied quietly: "Yes, Bardath, ours is an active race"; and, as he resumed his reverie, his companion looked significantly at the stouter man, whose face was now wet with the heat. They were fond of their young friend, but they both knew that he "disapproved" of many things, and probably of this. For he was, eccentric, and unwilling to think like other men.

Their guess was correct. Colcan the poet, his chin on his hands, was shuddering at the gaiety of the city. He thought of the powerful procession which would soon come into sight, and pass below and on to the end of the Way; the chariots, the files of bearded priests, the King leading his white horse, and then, with the High Priest at their head, the lonely little company of victims, with a freezing hopelessness in their eyes. It seemed strange to him that, as a boy, he had come every year with his parents and watched the pageant with delight. Then-in what year he did not remember—some change had happened in his brain, and the agony of each ensuing year's festival had left behind it a sediment of continual unease and occasional acute pain. How incredible it was! These kindly thousands, these sedate functionaries, this ordered civilisation with all its complex machinery of subsistence, of law and custom; that it should all be in essence a conspiracy, the crown of whose achievement was this ritual of torture and murder.

One year, when the silence of the passing victims was on the crowd, he had heard a sudden shriek and a hubbub. and then there had been a surge of the crowd to his left. "Poor woman, her son must have been taken," whispered the people around him; and then the murmurs of compassion had faded away in the cheering that greeted the African elephants who, with the royal archers on their backs, cumbrously towered along at the rear of the procession. That mother's torment was unforgettable. Probably she was dead now, and her griefs did not matter; but here was the eternal infamy going on, the same blind acceptance, the same consecration of unspeakably bestial cruelty, the same immeasurable stupidity. He was sick at heart as he thought of it, and, as the sound of beaten gongs rumbled from the distance, he rose, said he was going into the garden, and left his companions alone to watch the pageant.

Colcan the poet descended a short stair, crossed a courtyard, and passed under a gateway on to a terrace of veined agate that overlooked the garden. No birds were singing; the trees were still in the heat; and, above the less aggressive clamour of the crowd, there penetrated to his ears the ever-approaching fury of the Holy Gongs. The clanging swelled and swelled until it smote his ears like blows. Then it passed, and receded, and diminished towards its goal. Colcan shivered and felt like vomiting. The doomed were moving towards their end. Their white faces and dragging feet were nearing the temple; high above them, if they had still the power to look up, they could now see the immense, dominating face of the pyramid, the converging line of the climbing steps, and, 22

where the summit pricked the sky, the tiny square jut made by the slab of the huge altar. As once more he saw in his mind the fainting bodies in an inescapable machine, the venerable priest, the binding, the incantation. the swift slice of the knife, the blood jetting over the stone, he sprang up and began walking feverishly to and fro with his palms pressed over his ears and his forehead sweating. He had sat down again when Bardath and Môl stepped out from the house. Suppressed excitement had exhausted them. They lay down on two divans, and Bardath called for cooling drinks and fans. He and Môl remained for some minutes in languid silence; they refreshed their eyes with the fountain and the inky green of the cedars, and turned occasionally to scrutinise the face of their companion. He sat with his chin in his hands and his elbows on his knees, looking into an imaginary distance. At last Bardath spoke:

"I suppose, Colcan," he said, "that you are still brooding over what you will call the iniquity of human sacri-

fice?"

Colcan, in a polite but agitated tone, said that he was. Then his anguish forced its way out. Suddenly flashing at Bardath, "What else do you call it?" he cried fiercely. He contracted his eyes; "Oh, it's horrible," he gasped, "I feel unclean."

Bardath looked at him whimsically and a little paternally. "My good Colcan," he remarked, "do not distress yourself so. There are worse things in the world than this. It is a beautiful day. Have something to drink." "Yes," said Môl, "that's what you want."

Colcan, with his mouth drawn and his hands trembling,

stood up and faced them. "I implore you," he said, "you do not know how brutal you are being and how men like you hold things back. I ask you, do you dare to imagine what these victims to-day have gone through?"

"I prefer not to," said Bardath, raising his knee to adjust the strap of his sandal, "at any rate it is all over now."

"Oh no," cried the boy again, "it isn't all over. It's going on. The air is infected by it. We all reek of it. The State is built on it. It is one great edifice of murder And as for us," he went on bitterly, "we don't even believe it does any good. We simply let this horror go on and on and we don't know what it's for. We don't even believe in the gods.

Môl's puffy face went red and he frowned. "Please don't get so excited, Colcan," he said, "I sympathise with you to some extent, but you need not be blasphemous."

Their two solid figures grouped together suddenly seemed to Colcan to typify all the evil of the world. He felt a fire inside him. "Oh!" he thought, "My God! My God! . . . I hate you both. . . . You filthy beasts." Then he checked himself and, in a voice which his self-restraint made tremble, said "Would you, Bardath, if you were making a world, put this into it?"

Bardath was a considerate man, but he had the courage of his convictions. "Yes, Colcan, I should," he said. "Death has to come to us all some time and the mere infliction of death is nothing. And it is my belief that human character is such that familiarity with death and pain is the only thing which can keep it from softening into indolence and decay. The emotions of the sacrifice and the slight risk of exposure to it that each of us takes 24

in his youth, have an incalculably strengthening effect. I believe that the whole power of Atlantis, and ultimately the welfare of all mankind, is founded upon this institution which your hyper-sensitiveness cannot stomach."

Fat Môl was rather sentimental. He, too, had had his moments of doubt, and he possessed few theories. He cleared his throat and, failing to look either of his friends in the face, said: "I don't know about that, Bardath. Suffering is very terrible, and I admit with Colcan that human sacrifice has its seamy side. All I say is that it always has been and always will be. So we had better get all the benefit out of it that we can."

The sunset withered, the after-light waned, and the breeze of evening twice swished in the garden trees. In the royal palace the slaves were already arranging couches for the hundreds of guests who were expected at the banquet which once a year, on the day of this Solemn Festival, was given in honour of the foundation and preservation of the city and of the awful rites with which, from remotest time, the favour of the gods had been secured. The populace, that happy evening, also celebrated after their manner: and the three friends, sitting on their terrace, could hear the beginnings of the night's merriment in the neighbouring streets; and they knew that in countless homes the lamps were being lit and the tables spread, and the children, allowed for once to stay up, were laughing and chattering in expectation of the cutting of the ceremonial cake with a wooden model of the sacrificial knife. It grew dark. The three men rose. Bardath and Môl were going to the banquet and retired to make themselves ready.

25

But the poet Colcan walked away out of the city into the fields. The noise grew fainter behind him, the stars brighter over his head; and he walked until he came to a hill which hid the lights of the town and he was alone in a dark, wide place under the huge star-scattered heaven. His heart swelled painfully because of the horror of the things that had been done since morning; and worst of all, perhaps, to him was not the agony of the poor victims who, like their murderers, accepted their fate as part of the eternal order of nature, but the blindness and callousness of those who could inflict such suffering, could calmly mutilate, or watch whilst others did so, the bodies of bound and helpless human beings. In truth he could not deny that his countrymen, from princes, magistrates and priests downwards, were not all ogres: he remembered Gorco, the amiable old High Priest, who had often patted his head and encouraged his studies when he was a boy. What appalling curse had been spoken over the cradle of the race that such frightful perversity of unconsciousness should afflict it? What end could any god achieve by it? Why did not heaven extirpate mankind at once and have done with it? What was the use of anything whilst such brutality was universal and remained unquestioned? Could any gods exist at all?

As he walked, the briskness of the exercise, the coolness of the wind, and the consoling company of the quiet night, calmed him; and he fell imperceptibly into a milder and happier train of thought. He dreamed of a day when the eyes of civilised mankind should have been opened; when the streets of a later Atlantis should know nothing of the great pyramidical altar, and a more enlightened 26

priesthood should look back in uncomprehending disgust on the sacrificial knife. It was a wild dream, and he knew it. Did human nature ever really change; was there, in fact, any hope at all that an institution so ancient and hallowed as the Altar of Blood should ever be abandoned? He knew he was dreaming, but it comforted him to dream; and deep in his mind was a conviction, based on nothing more than the strength of his own longing, that what ought to come must come.

Centuries before Homer was born they buried Colcan. He had reached a great age: his songs were sung throughout the length and breadth of Atlantis; the peasants sang them at harvest-time, and the sailors as they pulled at their ropes. The Government built him a large tomb by the sea's edge; and as an especial tribute to his fame and solace to his shade they killed a young girl at the doorway of the

grave.

When a few more kings had reigned, the earth trembled, and an immense tidal wave swept over the whole continent of Atlantis and submerged it.



A SUMMER'S DAY





MILE northwards of that raucous place Scheveningen the dunes increase in height and the flat sands are bare of tents and almost free of people. Even had they not been on their honeymoon the pair of them would have fled from the hotels, the fruit-stalls and the multitudinous parasols; as it was, they sought com-

parative solitude as a matter of course. Face downwards in the long grass they lay in a hollow of the sand cliff's edge and looked down on the sands and the sunlit sea. To the hazy horizon the waters stretched away as smooth as satin; but a few yards from shore long low ripples came into being, to file placidly and evenly inwards and break

with sleepy splash.

Their cheeks were flushed, their eyes shone happily as they lay. They watched the passage of the day. The sea was vacant except for a brown-sailed fishing-boat that hung motionless for hours in the middle distance; and long stains of smoke slumbered along the horizon. Far to the left were the thronging black specks of the populous bathing-place; but here a few stray families sat on the sands reading or playing, and only occasionally did some man or child wander along and paddle in the water for a while.

For the hundredth time that day he turned his head and, fervently pressing her hand, looked smiling into her eyes. A delighted crow from a small erector of sand castles below made them both laugh happily. "Isn't it lovely?" she said. "Yes," he replied, "I wish it would last for ever."

There was a long silence, during which each pursued a pleasant train of thought. At last he spoke again: "Do you remember that first summer's day two years ago; your old blue hat and our silly cross-purposes and then how happy we were when we knew." "Oh, of course I do, you old stupid," said she. "The day," he went on, "was as lovely as this. The sky was as blue. The wood was as quiet as the sea is now. I felt then just as I feel now, that nothing would ever change. Of course I know that it will really, but I cannot conceive our leaving each other. I feel as though we could not stop living or even grow old." "Yes," she replied, "I feel like that, too, in a way. I'm sure that no one ever dies unless he wants to. I think to desire to live is to live . . . how could we die when we can live like this." Lips parted, they looked at each other from under languid evelids.

They were again watching the sea shining in the late afternoon sun when a little shout attracted their notice. A big man in a cap, with his trousers rolled up to his knees, was wading far in and reaching out into the water with the handle of an umbrella. As a ripple turned, something white flashed in the water. The man, catching it with his crook, began tugging at it and walking backwards. It looked like a small wet sheet with something heavy at the end of it. A little wave splashed and retired; and with a last heave and a short backward run the man with the hook slid his catch along the wet flat sand and drew it up to a dry place. His form screened a part of it, but from 32

the dunes they could see a stiff white limb and a forlorn peak of wet shirt. "Good God, it is a dead body," he said, with a slight feeling of sickness. The girl's face paled and she grasped his hand more tightly as she stared down at the beach where the discoverer was waving his arms and shouting incomprehensible words. Two little children with bare legs came running up and stood, their spades clenched, gazing at the sea's refuse. Then men and women on the nearer sands, catching sight of the motionless group, began to walk up. The animation of the proceedings began to get interesting, and all feeling of nausea left the watching pair. When the group had become a thick black knot it was obvious to people in the distance that something most unusual had happened, and far away little black and white figures hurriedly moved, men and women who broke into an excited run as they approached. Now bicyclists began to arrive; and, as the crowd grew larger, the approaching streams of running people became thicker. It seemed at last as though the whole population of the thronged strand southward were heaving along towards the centre of curiosity.

From above it was no longer possible to see anything of the corpse, and the whereabouts of its finder were only indicated by the poise and direction of the caps and hats where the crowd was thickest. There was great pressing and squeezing and murmuring. In a pure heaven the sun shone softly on a tranquil sea. The couple on the dunes gazed down like persons who watch a cinematograph show. There was something very mechanical about this nucleus of attraction, this centripetal motion of human atoms, this steady accretion to a magnetic centre; and

they were too far off to be touched humanly by distinct significant words.

Far along the beach there was a stir more vigorous than ever. Something was rushing along. Nearer, it was seen to be a number of men with a vehicle. Careering fiercely, sweeping everybody aside, came the ambulance corps.

They pushed through the crowd to the centre where their coloured headgears were prominent. For some minutes affairs were at a standstill. Doubtless they were examining the body and trying restoratives. They were too late, perhaps days too late. At last, commanding the people to fall back, they lifted the body; it shone dully white as it was deposited on the cart and covered over. A shout, a strain, and a gallop, and they were off to the town.

It was half an hour before the crowd entirely melted away again, for every late comer had inquiries to make of those more early on the scene, and the hero of the umbrella had many things to say. Waving his weapon to emphasise points, he remained long, being one of the last to go. Thus he had first seen something; thus he had waded in ("the waves splashed over my trousers although they were well tucked up"); and thus he had dragged his find to the shore and felt ill as it lay at his feet. Finally, his energies and the curiosity of his auditors exhausted, he departed.

Once more in the light of the low sun there was no one on the stretch of sand, now ploughed by a thousand feet, except two or three children, industrious with their spades and buckets, and a man, behind the fair, who had strolled along and settled down for a pipe before going home, unconscious of what had been happening where he sat. The lovers lay still without saying much. Their eyes

were fixed on the setting sun with its girdle of small pearly clouds above the many-coloured sea. They were thinking of an unknown man drowned. Perhaps he was a holiday-maker, by now identified, who on the previous day had walked about the sands; perhaps a sailor who had fallen overboard many miles away, and had been washed about dead for days, turning and turning in the water. In a city or village abroad there were people writing letters to a man who would not receive them.

The sun sank, and quietly night came over. All the voices had drifted away, and the stars shone on the pale sands and the faintly-washing margin of the sea. The two could have lingered all night with such beauty, but they were hungry. They began walking back to the town. When they started they talked a little of what they had seen, and joked wanly about the automatism of the crowd; but the air was fresh and the stars bright, and it was rather fun trying to take short cuts amid the sandhills, and they were feeling very happy and immortal. So very soon they forgot all about it; for youth and good fortune will be served.



A GOOD LITTLE BOY





N adolescence and early maturity a man usually allows his boyhood to pass out of remembrance. His mental operations are extensive and thrusting; he is obsessed by his own intellectual development; he seldom glances backwards; he regards the child of the past as the mere larva which has evolved into

a higher and more brilliant creature, a being with unequalled powers and superb sensibilities; a prince of created things. He can and may recall some of the child's habits and journeys, some of its grievances and deceptions, jealousies, ambitions and prides. These by an effort of memory he is able to recover, though they are mostly dead to him, like the occasions, the chance concatenations of unimportant events, that caused them. But he does not trouble to remember the child's most intense and intimate experiences, the adventures not directly related with other persons, the joys that arose from fresh and unhabituated contact with nature. There comes a time when things change. After a man has outgrown his first enthusiasms and illusions he learns to reverence his own childhood. It is invested with a new and almost sacred interest for him.

On the long line of solitary meditation or in the dragnet of miscellaneous conversation some stray reminiscence from early years is brought shining to the surface; and it is not again thrown away. By degrees such memories accumulate until there is a coherent fabric of them, recollections

of impressions long since received by a being who formulated nothing and deliberately recorded nothing. A man exhausts culture; he discovers that Art is but a makeshift by which the sophisticated painfully struggle to recreate sensations that well spontaneous in the souls of the young. He comes to realise that the best and truest æsthete is the child. Memory teaches that the natural child, ignorant of culture which is born of comparison, analysis and classification, breathes in beauty as the plant its proper air; sound and colour and form and the play of light fill him with wonder and joy, and he does not attempt or dream of definition or explanation.

The child, very young, was given balls and skeins of coloured wools with which it was intended he should make reins for human horses. He was indifferent and clumsy about the manufacture, which was conducted by means of pins stuck into large corks with holes in them: but of the colours he never tired. They were bright and varied. Vermilion on a skein would merge into splendid orange and that into a pure yellow and that into green; or a pale celestial blue would pass into a blue more gorgeous. and that into purple, which would grade—and the marvellous surprise of the changes never palled—into a scale of glorious browns. Here shape had nothing to do with his pleasure; in those simple ropes of wool the dazzlingly vivid colours were almost disembodied, like the hues of a luminous cloudless sunset. The child did not know what he was doing: but he would hold the skeins in his hands, his eyes very still, sighing from excess of delight. Colour was his divinity, which took him out of himself; contemplation of 40

it consumed him; unconsciously he strove to plunge into the heart of the colour as the religious mystic into the bosom of God. Even then he knew, though he did not put his feelings into words, something of the grief of unattainment; for, with all his straining of heart and eyes, he could never reach the inmost core of these heaving waves of splendour. His elders would remark: "Isn't he a good little boy; he amuses himself so nicely."

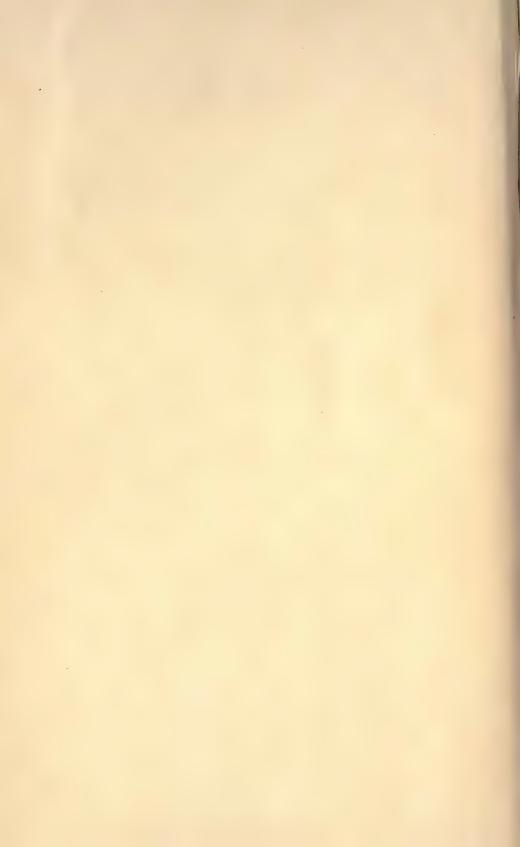
Sometimes he was very happy by the sea. He loved the rock-pools with their red and green anemones, and the stones in the shingle, all of which were beautiful and never two alike. Especially he loved those calm days when one can look along a level glittering sea and the sails on the horizon are like little clouds. But in the country he was always happy; he would steep himself in the scent and the warm shadows of barns; great rugged tree-trunks and smooth lawns were never lacking, and there were always delightful particular places where he could go by himself.

In one place a little path took him out of sight of the low house to a piece of waste land covered with ragged clumps of bramble and thorn. On the farther side was a swamp. Out of the water, where ridged newts swam, sprang green sword-like reeds and mottled yellow irises, strong flowers, sublimely fashioned, which seemed to return his gaze. On the moist hummocks of the bank grew multitudes of rushes, narrow javelins each tufted with a brown tuft at the side. He would pluck one and strip off its green skin, drawing out a long soft kernel almost weightless and as white as whitest snow. This he would lay across his hand and admire; or draw it over his cheek and lip for the exquisite softness of it; and then he would

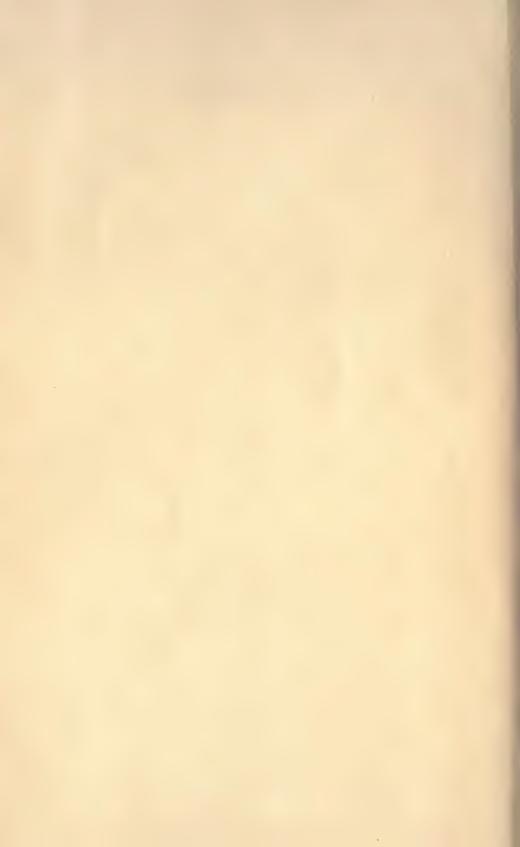
break it. There was something that moved him profoundly when at the smallest tension it almost melted into fragments. He was experiencing the poignancy and loveliness that cling to all that floats and to everything that is evanescent.

In another place, where he spent a long summer, there was an orchard of old mossy trees, sunny and undisturbed, with long green grass underfoot. The orchard made a gentle valley for a little brook which curved peacefully through its entire length, here so narrow that one could step across it, and here broadening out into a bright shallow pool reflecting the clouds and the sky. Hither he would come day after day, no one knowing where he was, and lie all the afternoon, face downwards on the bank, his hands supporting his chin, in some spot where the sun fell through overhanging leaves to the cool flowing water. He would observe very intently the flies delicately wafting over the surface, and the small fish, with heads pointing up-stream, waving gently in the current. More often, for from this he derived most pleasure, he watched the rivulet's bed of light-brown sand. Shadows would fleet across it as the clouds went overhead, and now and then, most perfect delight of all, a tiny ring of light, like a hollow star. It never occurred to him that this was the reflection of a bubble surviving from an elfin waterfall farther up: it was a beautiful mystery as it sailed slowly over the peaceful sand under the clear water. In the evening he went to bed with his skin slightly burning and his eyes tired; and he slept dreamless.

The grown man can seldom lose himself. He criticises: he examines; he enjoys briefly. Beauty can pierce him suddenly, it cannot often envelop him from dawn to twilight. Surrender to beauty must be involuntary to be complete; purpose and self-consciousness break the bond and the enchantment. We, with our intellect, must needs separate ourselves from things; we know ourselves standing outside them and the separation engenders chillness. The child alone, wise in his oblivion to facts and theories, can reach a calm and abiding unity with the hidden world of which the visible is the cloak. He walks with Beauty daily and has no necessity for a creed.



A DEAD MAN





HE screaming of the gale had dwindled into a fitful grumbling; the recurrent boom and crash and hiss of the sleepless North Sea on the shingle below the cottage was soothing by contrast with the wild elemental tumult that had been filling the hours after twilight. The little window had ceased to rattle;

the fire had pulled itself together and the lamp burnt up comfortably. Probably the inhabitants of the fishermen's hovels around had all gone to bed long ago; the knowledge of that, I cannot tell why, added to my feeling of seclusion. In an arm-chair, with my dressing-gown around me, a pipe in my left hand and a glass of warm liquor within reach of my right, I settled down to the familiar book. It had been my periodic, though never my continual, companion during my later schooldays and ever since. Given quiet and solitude, it had always the power of taking me, without effort or delay, into another world.

Did I still smoke and feel the warm fire about my knees? In a mechanical way; but my essential self was elsewhere. Here was a world where shadows walked more vivid and grim than any mundane creature, a sunless land reeking with heavy vapours and populated with monstrous shapes of disease and misery and sin. Here there were dark caves where the soul was a prey to infamous insects; gray fields hissing at the beat of straight pillars of unending rain; black lakes writhing with hideous coils; abysmal woods, and winds that howled desolately around the graves of the unhappy dead. Here, in a slimy soil, full of pits and

broken implements, lay great disjected limbs, fragments of terrible marble splendour, half-buried in dark festering ground whence sprang only rare clusters of heavy and venomous blooms. Old blind men and women groped by mouldering damp walls; miserable taverns, ill-furnished and lit with smoky lanterns, accommodated companies of the damned, ferocious and wretched, gambling at faded green tables or holding haggard revels with out-worn courtesans. Everywhere, beneath a sky as merciless as iron, walked the poet, his shoulders bowed, his strong head thrust forward in an intense and melancholy curiosity. His profound eyes under their weary and compassionate lids burned with a sombre lustre; his wide firm mouth with its projecting lower lip wore an expression of imperial sadness, of amusement without joy, tenderness without illusion, and pity without hope.

Rocks, darkness, blood, poisonous fungi, the oily scales of gigantic snakes, rotting bodies dead and alive, lovely things gone purulent and a prey to armies of worms: these things he beheld around him, and Remorse, Gloom and Despair flew their sable standards on the battlements of his brain. Yet as he lived in this nightmare country the measure of its horror and infamy was the measure of the sweetness of terrestrial regions and forms he had seen and would not see again and of spiritual fountains he had always thirsted for and would never know. With courteous and precise cynicism on his lips, he thought of quiet virginal chambers, of waters singing under the moon, of terraces where taintless music sobbed into the open night, of pure maternal mistresses with protecting arms and vigilant eyes, of fields slumbering in the sunlight, of leagues of ocean

heaving under warm tremulous heavens, of hot ports, gorgeous and perfumed, where forests of masts sprang by the blazing quays, and palm-trees grew to the verge of the glittering blue waters. And in more purged and abstract mood he would dream of divine Beauty, throned in plains of inaccessible azure, remote from the squalor and vice of the actual, sublimely placid, Beauty who never smiled and

never wept. . . .

The lamp burned more dimly, and I closed the book. Chin on hands, elbows on knees, I stared into the sleepy fire and thought of him. He had died long before I was born, after complete paralysis had immured him, a living corpse, for many months. Nevertheless I knew each line of his face, each expression of his features, every subtle inflection of his inner voice, every pang that gnawed at his breast. I could not conceive that dissolution could touch him or that death could work a change in him; I felt that his spirit was eternal and constant, more durable and more certain than the stars and their systems. So I mused, as I had done from time to time for years.

With a start and a swift fearful throbbing of the blood I sat up and sharply turned. Was it a step behind me?

The flames softly lapped and the coals made pin-point crackles; outside in the darkness the sea still boomed and washed on the shingle. Everything in the corner by the stair was in its place; the fire shone as usual on the edges of chair and box and picture frame. Yet my heart shook and my limbs stiffened and the scalp under my hair tingled chill as if at the touch of supernatural fingers; for I knew there was something in the corner, an inaudible sound, an invisible cloud.

Dry-lipped I spoke. I did not hear but, as it were, felt an answer. It was he; I knew it and my fear fell off me like

a cold sheet; gently joyous I whispered his name.

Sensible of nothing else, I looked at the place where I knew he stood. With effortless mental vision I saw him. Nothing of him had altered; the broad brow, the profound eyes, the firm and melancholy mouth. I had no need to speak again. He could read every thought, every friendly impulse that brought tears of glad sorrow into my eyes. Around his lips there hovered the wistfully cynical smile of one who mocked all things and himself most of all, and pitied all things but himself least. He had come for a friend through a door, unlocked, for all I know, never before or since. But though the smile still floated around his lips, his deep eyes, when he perceived my voiceless inquiry, were for a moment hard with unmingled suffering. It was as though in his formal polite way he was speaking: "I am who I was and where I was. I long for the things I have never seen and those I shall never see again. The beauty I find is evil and pestilent; the beauty I search for I shall not find. The springs of the milky way are salt to my palate as the rivers of the earth; and, like the apples of life, the golden stars have turned to ashes in my hand."

The shadowy air in the room quivered. Solitude most evident poured over me. I knew he had gone away, the hunger for the unattainable in his heart, a lonely voyager

faring for ever through an alien universe.

I felt as though my body did not belong to me. With an arm on the mantelpiece, I kicked moodily at the fender; then with an automatic laugh I prepared to go to bed. There was no desire of any kind left in me.

THE BOOKSHOP IN DREAMS





HERE is an old bookshop I visit in my dreams. Waking I have never been, I think, to the town in which it is situated; whether I shall ever chance to find it I do not know.

I always reach the place by the same route. I find myself in a main thoroughfare, sunny and pleasant, but fairly full of vehicles, people, and

busy shops. With the sun on my left I walk up the bright side of the road for a short distance, until I come to a turning which leads me into a small street of retired houses with green shutters and green, brass knockered doors. At the end of this street there is a large square or, rather, a crescent with a straight base, and a wooded luxuriant garden in the middle. The curved and farther side, along which I have never walked, but the middle parts of which can just be seen through the trees, consists of tall grey houses; but if one turns to one's left along the straight side one passes smaller houses of only two stories, with flowerpots in the windows and grained brown doors. Nearly at the end of it is the shop, the only one in the row. Why it should be there I never think of asking except when I am awake.

The shop is low. Curiously, I have never noticed—and it is futile when waking to resolve to notice during the next dream—whether there is any name above the window. Perhaps the old man who lives there has a name; I cannot say. But how well I know everything else about the exterior! The windows full from top to bottom of old books, large and small, somewhat dusty, but

by no means repellently dirty; the bench along the pavement heavy with books; and the four tall rows of little shelves in and beside the doorway. All these books outside detain me, for all are old though not, as a rule, precious. On the bench are folios and thick quartos, in entrancing covers of yellowing vellum tooled with gold or rock-like brown leather with ridges at the backs like the ribs of stately ships. "Not here, O Apollo, are haunts meet for thee"; these great galleons of print carry not sandalwood or peacocks or Dionysian grapes; they are histories of the wars in the Pays-Bas, commentaries on Isaiah, or complete collections of the works of Eusebius or Origen. My eyes pass over them and stoop where there is a binding especially choice or especially ragged; I pick the book up, both hands often being necessary, and glance over the expansive pages. Now and then I linger to admire some type clearer and nobler than any type of modern designing, or some paper which has retained its white beauty for three hundred years. But I do not stay long by the bench.

Nothing makes any noise in my dreams. I hear no traffic or sounds of passers by. In interest or amusement I open my lips and smile; but I never hear my voice. The pages do not rustle when turned, and my feet are soundless as I move down to the shelves around the door. There it is that my heart flutters with joy; hundreds of octavos and little duodecimos fill these shelves, and every one is desirable, a real book, quietly and soundly covered, and worthy to have been written. I have never seen there one bearing a date as late as eighteen hundred, and their title-pages, engraved with Cupids and medallions, allegorical 54

figures, Minervas and sprays of formal leaves, attest that they were printed in cities with good Latin names, Londinium, Lugdunum of the Batavians, Amstelaedamum, Lipsia, and Colonia. Here are Delphin classics bulging with notes written by superb pedants now gone out of remembrance; Jesuit manuals of instructions; handbooks of duelling and good manners; translations of Sappho, Anacreon, Plutarch and Terence into French and Jacobean English; and poets of many kinds. The eighteenth-century French abound—Piron, Grécourt, Dorat, Gentil-Bernard, a debonair and ironic crew printed with a delicate dignity appropriate to them. I put back Quarles His Divine Fancies and take out Sir Richard Lovelace; I put back Lovelace and take out Waller in two courtly little volumes. I should like to possess each one that I handle; I do not know what curious power checks my covetousness and makes me restore them to their shelves. Vaguely I determine that I will have many of them, but yet I do not pick out and set apart the ones I want. Passing my fingers sensuously along the backs of an upper row, I step into the dark shop.

From the outside you would not think that the shop inside could be so high; but the floor of the upper story does not exist; the whole of the inside of the building is one large room. At a table in the corner behind the window sits the old man with his straggly grey hair, screwed-up eyes and heavy spectacles perched low on the thick warty nose that dominates his square chin and wide clenched slit of a mouth. He looks up from his reading as I enter—he is holding an enormous folio with both hands, his thumbs sticking upwards—nods slightly but firmly, and

then resumes his reading. I look all around. From the floor to the dark raftered roof the place is full of books; shelves line every wall, and the floor is so heaped that there is scarcely room to move the worm-eaten ladder that gives one access to the upper tiers. It would be impossible to see any of the books, except those near the door, were it not that a lighted candle in an old green tin candlestick

stands ready for use on a pile of books.

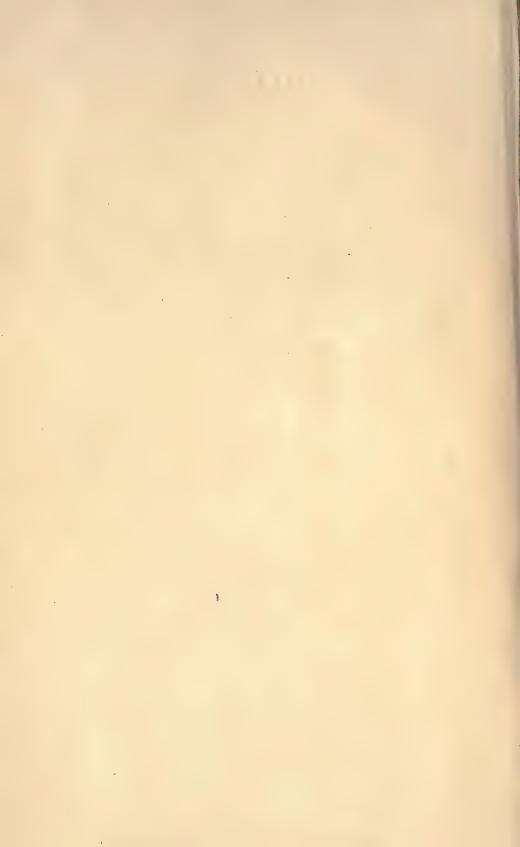
I go slowly around holding the candle aloft. The old man, bent over his tome, takes no notice of me; the candle sends great shadows flying about, shadows that fight with the daylight near the door but are unchallenged in the far recesses. The thousands of books are of all sizes from the hugest to the most minute; they are so wonderful that I could fling my arms around them, dusty as they are, a shelf-full at a time, and hug them in ecstasy; yet I am never surprised that they are there. I cannot remember how often I have seen any particular book; but at one time or another I have reverently taken from those pillared, deep-brown, softly-shining files, all the great old books that ever were in the world-vast, marvellously printed early Venetians with endless wood-cuts; bound illuminated monastic texts of Chaucer: folios of the Elizabeth dramatists; Caxtons and Wynkyn de Wordes, a battalion of them suddenly come upon in some low obscure corner; Tudor black-letters of poets who may have owned these very copies; manuscripts in Greek, Latin, Italian, Old French, Anglo-Saxon, and Gothic. Concentrate my brain now as I may, I cannot recall that I ever noticed label or pencilling of price on any of them; yet I have always known to certainty that any of them was mine for a 56

ridiculous price, sixpence or a shilling. I stay for hours and find it hard to go; returning again and again to some dark corner where the candle brings into mysterious brightness the name of some famous dead man's book, here anchored in a secluded port, breathing a strange calmness as though somehow aware that no vicissitude could bring it harm. The spell is difficult to break, but at last, reluctantly, I resolve to pick out an armful of the finest books, carry them away and come back another time; for in a place so unfrequented, where I have never seen a purchaser, it would assuredly be safe to leave things a little while without risk of their disappearance. I turn to speak to the preoccupied old man; and then I awake with a feeling of grief and loss, and resentful against myself for having delayed my purchases so long.

Most excellent bookshop, more magnificent than all others, I may enter you in my dreams this very night. I know every pane in your windows, every beam in your roof, every great undisturbed heap of books on your floor, and all the dim shelves that climb to that cave of your roof. Yet I do not think that I have ever trodden the streets of the town where you are situated, and I do not hope, save in dreams, ever to cross your threshold. And the other day, as I was sitting before a fire doing nothing, a chilling fancy (probably meaningless and absurd) came into my head as to the name of the old man who sits in his corner reading, with gnarled and immobile face.



DUTY





HEY had told William that he must not go into the coal-cellar; for when he had been there he had made himself very filthy. Being a little boy, with a considerable sense of duty. and a dislike of breaking his pledged word, he did try his best to keep away from it. But that grimy door at the end of the kitchen passage had

a strong fascination; and at last, after an irksome smoky fog had kept him indoors for two days, he was so bored with everything that he crept down the stairs, hesitated, glanced around, went on again, and finally, his heart thudding because of his sin, opened the cellar door and

went into the gloom.

Just inside the door the faint rays of gaslight from the misty passage gleamed on ridges of smooth coal; but round to the right the darkness was intense, a soft hollow darkness that revealed no farther wall, and was filled with a sea of silence.

He felt along the uneven wall, deliberately turning his back on the door in order that he might not see the least echo of light; then, inhaling languorously the opiate scent of the coal, he stared into the darkness and noiselessly swept his left hand to and fro with his fingers grasping at the impalpable. The hushed companionable spaces of the darkness lulled and rocked him, so that he felt no desire to move; forgetful of everything, he gazed and gazed, breathing deeply, until pinkish stars and waves swam over his vision, and he felt faint.

With a kind of silent shock his sight cleared again.

Opposite him in the black wall there was a sharp thin vertical line of bright yellow light. It broadened a little and smeared the coal at his feet with gold; it opened still wider and he saw, on a level as it seemed with his head, the bright green head of a tree, still in the sunlight. "Oh," he sighed excitedly, and stepped forward, his hands groping before him. Two stumbles, and he was at the strange door; his hand flung it back and he crossed the threshold to a pavement which slept white under the throbbing hot glory of a wonderful summer sky.

He was on the terrace, smoothly-flagged, of a long and placid stone house. There was no door behind him, only a high leaded oriel window with mouldering stone lacework, the first of a line that stood along the converging avenue of the terrace. Looking through the panes he saw a long spacious hall to which all the windows belonged, and on the glassy floor of the room each window flung a broad stream of sunlight, slightly stained here and there

with red or blue colour.

But though the house was old and beautiful it was not so beautiful as the landscape that spread beyond the low stone balustrade of the terrace. From the fishpond at the parapet's foot fell away the gardens of the house, first a series of sweeping lawns, then tangled borders of flowers, then, still sloping downwards towards an encircling valley in the middle distance, tall trees, and trees behind them, and gentle multitudes of treetops. The land fell; and then in a long gentle slope it rose again; there came ridge after ridge, softly green, meadows and clumps of trees and lonely poplars, remote, remote, until the most shadowy pencillings of land ended in a blue haze on the verge of sight.

Shading his eyes, William for a time stared out over this rolling territory, watching contentedly the mild shapes of the woods near him, or screwing his eyes up in a strained endeavour to see more clearly some uncertain object far away. The sun shone warm on his cheek, and his hand was warm on the balustrade; contemplation of this equable scene lulled him in complete ease and satisfaction. Being no artist and not very capable of naming things external or internal, he felt a reposeful elation without knowing or even asking why; and it was natural to him not to search for the date of the house or speculate as to the titles of the curious and superb blooms that crowded the flower-beds below. And so fine was the day, so exhilarating the air, that, although he was normally possessed of a great craving to explore empty and unknown rooms, he felt no impulse to look for an entrance into the house.

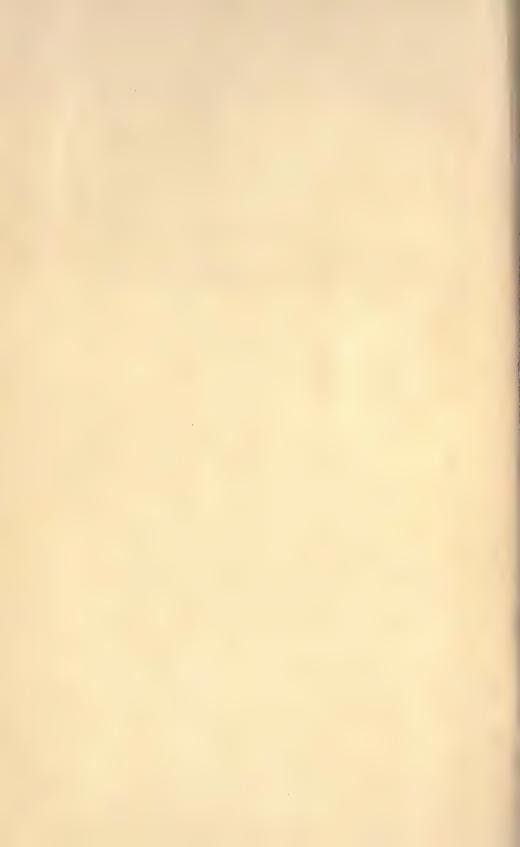
At the far end of the terrace there was a shrill cry and a flap of wings. A moulting peacock, one or two long feathers protruding from the dun shrubbery of his truncated tail, strutted down the balustrade, jerking his shiny blue neck and nodding his thinned crest. William, hands in pockets, nonchalantly walked down to meet him; but he was shy of approaches and flew up into a tree with dark green leaves which overhung the corner of the house. "Oh, you needn't if you don't want to," said William, and he turned down the broad reach of steps that led to the first lawn.

It was very pleasant to have no one near; to be master of one's surroundings and to walk where one liked; to jump or lie down; to handle anything one liked: but it was sufficient to feel this regal loneliness, and he made no attempt to exercise its privileges to any great extent. At the bottom of the steps he peered for a time into the filmy green depths of the pond where glided the huge shapes of ancestral carp, grey before he was born. He sat on the rim, cooled his hands in the water, and picked at the lichens on the brickwork. Then he sauntered over the fresh sunlit grass down between throngs of flowers into the margin of the wood. A few birds combated their summer drowsiness with infrequent notes. He looked up for them and could not find them; but through the branches the quivering blue sky was all burning with the sun. He turned and looked up at the long stone house. There it sat, firm on its stone bastion: its high tranquil windows reflecting the sun; its even battlements clearly cut against the blue behind them; its flanks guarded by tall seneschals of trees. It seemed as though this place of all places must be the true centre of the world; so serenely from its height did it look out over the world and silently command it.

Peace, though he scarcely knew the word, entered the boy's heart. A red admiral fluttered into the wood's edge and settled near him on a fretted spray of briar. He watched it thoughtfully as it opened its gorgeous dark wings with their red bars or closed them into a single rich upright leaf. It flew away, upward through the branches towards the sky. Quietly he followed its flight; quietly he turned away; slowly he walked up the slope, concerned for nothing but to breathe the soft air and unhurriedly gaze at the scene around him. He looked again at the profusion of cups and stars and bells in the flower-beds, and the even verdure of the lawns; he watched for a while the slow motion of the great fishes in the pond, and then again he climbed to the 64

sweet and stately dignity of the terrace windows, and surveyed the wide magnificence of the country that rolled away with its wooded ridges to the verge of sight. As he stood there behind the balustrade drinking with childish eyes the enchanted expanse of earth, there flooded in upon him, though he knew not its name, one great luxurious rhythm that lifted him away with massive and resistless swell. His head grew dizzy; pinkish waves and stars swam before his eyes; and out of darkness he awoke in a dismal coal-cellar, very damp, aching in all his limbs, and afraid of what would happen to him.

Such are the pleasures, and such, unhappily, the rewards of sensual delights and the obliviousness of duty.



A TALE FOR POSTERITY





HERE was a man in my day who fell in love. He was a young man, and not out of the common in genius or virtue. His passion was certainly violent in that, although it did not make him assume the mien and gait of an invalid dog, or wait behind a door to stab a supposed rival, it despoiled him of sleep, which had

hitherto been his constant possession. Lust, or, as a tactful contemporary of mine has termed it, the emphatic wish to be an ancestor, may have been the rock on which his radiant dream-castle was built: if so, he was unaware of it, and, after the most scrutinous analysis of his own feelings, honestly declared to himself that it was not so. It was some time before he spoke of what was in his heart to the woman with whom he was in love. He found a delight in her presence and in her conversation, which was sensible, humorous and sympathetic; he thought she shared his pleasure, and he saw clearly that she was interested in his nature and his opinions and preferences; but he shrank from opening his heart to her. This was partly owing to his pride, which made him unwilling to display himself to a woman of whom he was not sure, and who he feared might pity him; it was also in part born of a fastidiousness which made him perceive something indecent and discourteous in suddenly thrusting another person into a situation which she might possibly find awkward and possibly even painful. Consequently, though occasionally in her presence he could not help being silent, and though now and then his heart tightened and a slight swelling

came into his throat, he had not the strength to resist the assumption of a moodily-sorrowful air and the wish that something about him might convey to her the message that he had neither the courage nor, as he thought it, the ungentlemanliness to speak, and he kept his secret for months. Whether or not it was likely that he should find favour in this woman's eyes he did not, curiously enough, speculate. In his own heart he was not by any means modest. He thought himself—as we all think ourselves—a person of vast powers, unlimited capabilities, and a sensibility that marked him off from the mass of men. He knew that he had never given material and visible proof of these great qualities, and he could not in reason expect, though he sometimes half hoped, that other people would detect them by intuition or from some ethereal glint in his eyes. Granted, as he was inclined to grant to himself, that he was a conglomerate of Hector, Hamlet, Sophocles and Lancelot, he suspected that neither in his behaviour, which was of wont timid and hesitating, nor in his speech, from which he habitually excluded both rhetoric about the constitution of the world and intimate expression of his own deeper feelings and most cherished ambitions, had he allowed his inner nature to be revealed. Sometimes it occurred to him that he told her nothing of his gorgeous imaginations, or of the powers of which, given the incentive to effort, he was capable in the world of action—in war, in politics, and even in commerce. He had not, unfortunately, been taught music, but magnificent symphonies and orchestral odes were always ringing in his head; and he had half a mind to learn his notes and write his compositions down. Of painting a similar thing was true; pictures were done 70

by purblind people who could not see things either as decorations or as syllables of the spirit; they had over himself the sole, wretched advantage that they had been schooled in the manual craft of the business. He it was, potentially and therefore really, who wrote the poems of the age; who nailed his flag to the mast, and went down splendidly singing; who rallied a scattered people and swept mis-government from its seat; who filled a thousand ports with his grains and cloths and spices; who drove tunnels through the loftiest and most adamantine mountain chains. But he had no desire to boast or to expose himself to anybody. Persons of penetration, shrewd judges of character, could see things for themselves, and she was, of course, such a one. But in reality he did not ask himself whether or not she knew anything of all this. He examined his own feelings, but he did not examine or attempt to imagine hers; he merely wished mutely and very strongly that she did not think him a fool, and especially that she would not think him a fool and want to laugh when he told her that he loved her.

What finally provoked him to speech was this. It was intolerable to think that she might at any time contract herself by hazard, in a moment of abstraction as it were, to some man for whom she did not care and whom she might live to detest. He had it in his power perhaps, not only to save himself from mental torture, but to save her from a desolate or miserable life. So he decided that he must take the irretrievable step, although the thought of it made him quake and shiver.

They were outdoors one fine still evening (the moon was shining, but that was an accident and might not have

happened), and he said what he had meant to say on several previous occasions. Her face was pale and composed, and, in an unthinking pose which struck him—he rarely took notice of such things—as unusually beautiful, she was looking, chin on hand, out over the level country with its sparse trees and its strips of water silver to the moon. He explained himself quite suddenly in a couple of jerky sentences, worded casually and spoken in a tone of detached, almost scientific, impersonality. She did laugh, and she did call him a fool; but he found that there are

divers ways of doing this.

In the more intimate relationship of confessed lovers they were extremely happy. Nevertheless, he did not lose his judgment or his mental balance. He had no illusions about his lady; he quite coldly admitted to himself that she had certain faults, and that such and such other women excelled her in this or that respect; although, when all things were taken into account, she was superior to any woman of his acquaintance. Occasionally as time went on, so calculating and self-controlled was he, he asked himself whether he was really in love with her any longer. This did not happen when he had been away from her for any considerable period, or when his eyes were catching hers in sympathy or in amusement. At such times as those he was certain: but at other times he often wondered whether his continued fidelity was not due perhaps to sluggardly habit or cowardly romanticism rather than to any permanent strength of feeling. Were not the plashes and tinklings he heard in his breast but the echoes of the old flowing of a fountain that had ceased to flow? If they were, he desired to know it; for he was interested in the

truth about himself, and more especially in the truth about men.

Frequently, therefore, he would put it to himself whether he had not fallen in love again with some other person. Compunctions about such inquiry he considered to pertain rather to the kingdom of sentimental fiction than to that of reality; and he had no desire to tell himself any lies. He quite appreciated the social advantages that might attach to general lifelong monogamy, and he was not unsusceptible to the poetic glamour which centuries had cast over the idea of that condition. He even admitted that, under some circumstances, in this regard as in others, it might be desirable, it might even be an imperative duty, that a man should resist the gratification of his own inclinations. But even at that, failing the extreme case, he would have had-for his blood, like the blood of all ot us, was mingled cold and warm—difficulty in pursuing his inclinations when he had ascertained them.

He admitted that it was conceivable that the woman might retain her love (for, respecting a milder affection, he had no doubt that it would endure for life on both sides) for him after he had lost his for her. A similar change might have taken place the other way round. But he had (so he told me, and I respected him for it) a theory which made him ready to meet such emergencies. He held that jealousy was the worst of crimes. He was not hypocrite enough to pretent to be entirely immune from it. At the time of his first falling in love he had felt jealousy towards some persons unknown, and he had never been able to stifle a gentle pang when his lady told him of the girlish attractions she had felt for other men—a terrible lot of fools;

that was the worst of it—before he, the glowing and irresistible planet, had swum into her ken. Had she at any subsequent time left him for another, such feelings must again have affected him; but (and in this he appeared quite sincere) he would have fought them as unreasonable and ungenerous, and, above all, as witnesses of a desire to make encroachment on the liberty of another. This attitude, to his thinking, should be shared, and he held that he was right in acting on the assumption that it was shared.

And so he often asked himself whether he was not in love with one of his other woman friends. But (said he) the curious thing was that he never obtained a satisfactory answer to his question. Cynthia had straight unshrinking eyes, calm hands, and a profound insight into life and beauty. He never tired of her presence, but he drew back from the thought of touching her lips or her hair; it would have seemed, he knew not why, a profanation. Merope he loved as a man loves a man; for Lesbia, a dark-flushed beauty, most candid and generous, he experienced a physical attraction which he believed could only persist so long as it had no indulgence; it was like a faint, shining bubble that will burst and vanish at the first touch. Here he saw no possibility of fulness, there of stability; here the spirit was unmoved, there the body lethargic and dumb. Yet, whenever he had to answer his questionings with a "no," he experienced (so he confided in me) doubts as to the accuracy of his answer. Had he not perhaps, he would muse, faced the inquiry not squarely but with the furtive glance of one in sick haste to escape? Had he not allowed his judgment to be prejudiced beforehand by a timorous flinching from a breach with convention, a weak tendency not to fling a rude stone into the tranquil stream of his companion's existence, a craven and constitutional aversion from conclusions which must induce decisive and irrevocable action? Thus he would thresh his brain, beating about in blind and bewildered manner like a frightened bat in a cave. Sometimes, in the hope of arriving at clarity of mind and a well-tempered resolution, he would go out into a solitary place where he would commune with the placid afternoon skies, sitting with firm-shut lips and eyes remotely fixed. The end of such communion was always doubt and a sigh.

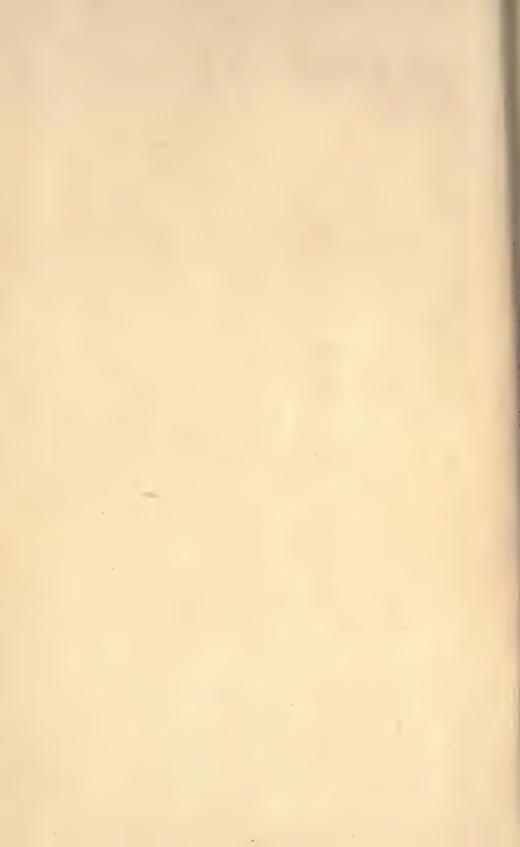
When I last met him, four or five years ago, he had arrived at no conclusion. One thing that, it seemed, had not occurred to him was that he didn't deserve his luck. Another was that, in the natural course of things, his speculations would be interrupted. I did not like to tell him: and, even if I had done so, he would have been

ready with an answer.

And if, my dear descendants, it is your open boast, or even your secret pride, that you have attained a muddled complexity of feeling and hesitancy of belief not previously known, you are making a boast or nursing a pride which is much older than yourselves, and much older than myself.



THE BASKET OF FLOWERS





T was a basket. Where had it come from?

The basket lay upon its side on the sunny ground. It was one of those old-fashioned very shallow baskets, with a small bottom, and sides opening out widely like the petals of a great gaping flower. It was straw-coloured and so

delicately made as to seem almost weightless; and it had a long hoop of a handle that was decorated with small bows of dainty pink and light-blue silk ribbon. It had been placed there very carefully with its load of pink roses and blue periwinkles that flowed over the wide rim; and for some reason, either of ceremony or of taste, it had been made the centre of a design of complete symmetry. Just below it on the turf lay crossed a rake and a shepherdess's crook. Upwards from it there curved two crescent ropes of roses that were tied at their junction with a silken true-lovers' knot; from each side extremity curling horns of roses fell along the turf; and down over the middle of the basket's side fell a light string of intertwined periwinkles.

The effect of the whole arrangement was ravishing. Basket, flowers, and ground, beautiful in their colours, seemed nevertheless all to have been steeped in some rare pale common medium that gave them a more than ordinary harmony. The art of the arrangement was artless; the exactitude so perfect as to seem almost casual; the basket, the flowers, and the ribbons might almost have fallen by

some miraculous spontaneity into their places; and had the wind moved one petal of one flower or straightened the ribbons of a single knot it would have shattered the

fragile beauty of the whole design.

But how did they get there? Whence, in a world gone harsh, had come these appurtenances of a day passed long ago, or a day, perhaps, that had never been at all? This basket; these mounded and interwoven flowers; this crook for the meekest of be-ribboned sheep; this slender rake, made to draw nothing more substantial than dead flowers or fallen leaves? What Perdita had strayed here from what remote pastures? and whither had she gone?

For the flowers were fresh. There had been no one in sight when my eyes first caught that meadow. After my first happy ecstasy at coming upon so beautiful a thing, I could not help scanning under a shading hand all the fields around for some glimpse of a retreating muslin gown. But the silence was intense, the solitude complete; and, though I fancied I saw beside the basket the faint print of a small

shoe, it was uncertain.

I stood and gazed at the basket of flowers, a slight mist over my eyes; and I let my mind wander as it liked. A flash as of lightning shimmered before me; when my eyes cleared I saw, not one maiden, but two young girls in thin white dresses come running towards me over the grass with laughter like tinkling bells. One came in front with a basket swung upon her arm and a great heap of flowers held lightly to her breast and trailing over her gown; and the other, following close, clasped in her bare brown arms a little rake and a crook. They stopped, never seeing me, near the place where I stood, laid their burdens upon the 80

ground, sat down, laughing in each other's eyes, and

stopped for breath.

They were slim and of equal height. But one had black hair and eyes, and a skin, naturally pale, burnt evenly brown by the sun; and the other had hair glinting light brown and large grey eyes, and cheeks the ruddiness of which glowed softly through her tan. "Oh, I am almost tired," said the dark one. "Come along, let's arrange it," replied the other, kneeling up; and, taking the basket from her arm, she held it in front of her knees. The other, suddenly recovering her energy, sprang up and knelt in front of her and poured a mass of roses into the basket. "Where shall it go?" she asked. "Just here," said the fair one, pointing to a plateau of grass at my feet, "this is a pretty place for it." So they carried their loads over, laid the basket of flowers on the ground, and with delicate flutterings of their fingers drew out small streamers of periwinkle tendrils with their beautiful little green leaves and squared blue flowers. Then they began twining roses into chains with ribbons from their dresses as binding. And as they worked they chattered and sang little fragments of songs. "Aren't they beautiful?" "Yes, one might think they had been picked to-day." "Isn't it rather a joke? Somebody will find it: if only he knew when they were really picked wouldn't it give him a surprise?"

They began to hurry as they gave the final twines to the girdling ropes. "We must make haste," said the girl with the black hair. "Finished now, I think," said the other, with a laugh of pleasure. "Whatever on earth made us come here and do this?" asked the dark one, looking up and knitting her brows with comical charm. "Good-

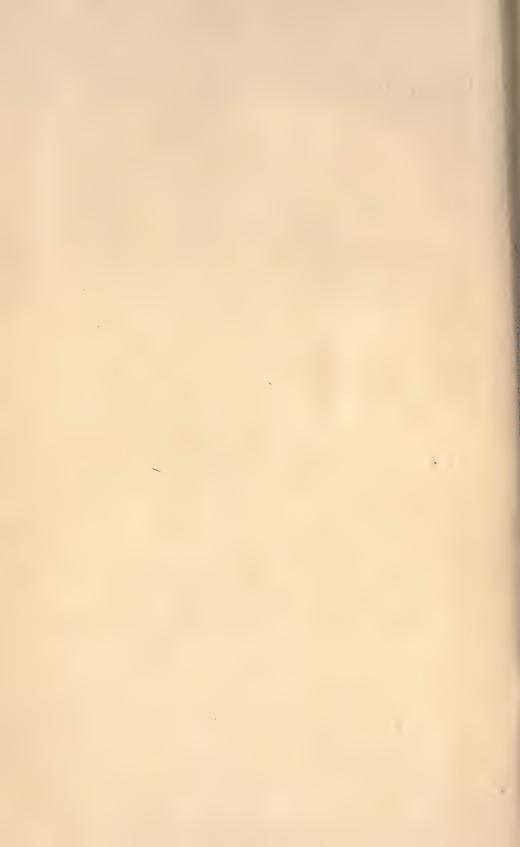
ness knows! but we've done it now." "Yes," and the other stood up and put her hands on her hips, "come along; we must get back at once or some fool will see us."

They stood there a moment with hands on each other's slender strong shoulders, and surveyed their work. "Come along," said the dark one. "Let's run!"

They turned, and with the swiftness and grace of young does fled over the meadows until their wavering garments disappeared behind the nearest clump of trees.

Unable to move, I stared after them. The atmosphere in front of me began to spin and revolve and turn inside out. And, alas! there were no trees and no meadows; but only a basket of flowers on the wall-paper in a bedroom in a Manchester hotel.

BARNETT AND HARRISON





HE other two men having gone, Barnett and Harrison moved their arm-chairs close up to the fire, one on each side. The only electric light burning was behind them, shining faintly in the gloom half-way up towards the library's lofty ceiling, and red reflections from the fire dabbled the men's collars and shirt-

fronts. Barnett finished his cigar and dropped it into the grate. He did not light another, but with one hand in his pocket, the other holding his whisky on the arm of his chair, and his feet stretched out before him, stared into the fire.

His thoughts were clearly wandering, and rather gloomily. There was an almost sulky look about his puffy but strong and not unhandsome face. Resentment against something unseen tightened the muscles around his eyes, and now and then his wide hard mouth wavered, as it were, into a slight sneer. There was always something impressive about his reserve, and in this mood there was a heightened fascination about him. The younger man, whose features wore a candour common amongst youths who have just passed through an English University, watched his face steadily.

After several minutes Barnett frowned, jerked his head back impatiently, and twisted in his chair. Young Harrison, aware of a sudden constraint, thought it time to break the silence; for he had not known his companion long. "You were talking," he said, "of Germany. Have you ever lived in Germany."

"Yes," replied Barnett, tapping the fender with his slipper, "I lived there for a year."

"Where? Berlin?"

"Oh, yes; Berlin, Munich, Dresden, Heidelberg, and so on."

Silence again fell. The clock ticked and the fire rippled. Harrison essayed again. "You know Russia at all?" he asked.

"Yes, I know Russia pretty well."

"St. Petersburg?"

"Yes, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Odessa, Kieff, Nov-gorod."

A new respect came over the young man's eyes. He wondered who this fellow was; why he should have wandered like this from place to place; and what kind of sins and follies he had committed. Had he some picturesque history; was he well-known under some other name; what secrets did his ugly mouth conceal; and why should he be here to-night, wearing a mask before three respectable Englishmen who were his guests at dinner? Examining the lines of his face, Harrison felt a little uneasy and even afraid. And so sharply did Barnett resume the conversation that the young man started.

"I have lived in Germany, yes," said Barnett, fixing his burning brown eyes on Harrison, and giving a brutal little laugh. "I have been in Russia; I am familiar with every other country in Europe, from Lapland to Calabria and from Portugal to the Urals. I have lived among Turks as a Turk, I have canoed about the upper arms of the Amazon, I know all the places in India that anyone could ever want to see, and I have dug for gold in Australia."

The younger man, fascinated, felt a desire to see how far the catalogue could be extended. "Have you travelled in China?" he asked.

"I have been all over the place in China," replied Barnett, "and," jerking a little nasal laugh, "I have spent for no particular reason a considerable time in Bokhara and Samarcand, which have romantic names on false pretences."

"It must be ripping to have been all over the shop like that," murmured Harrison with innocent eagerness.

A sudden flood of hot energy seemed to flow into Barnett. His fist beat his knee; his eyes glowed with a contemptuous fire and his mouth writhed like a snake's back. "H'm," he said harshly, "do I look as if I enjoyed myself? Do I look like a man who muses happily over packets of fragrant memories? I have covered the world; and I will tell you one thing: it is the same everywhere, sometimes filthy and always tedious. I had your views when I was your age. Whenever I thought of a place I went to it; and when you go to a place you spoil it. Even now sometimes I get weak and imagine I could find pleasure if I went back to the East Indies, where the skies are hot blue and the sun's blazing gold and the sea sleeps below shores of incredible vegetation. But if I went there I should be sick of it in a day."

To Harrison's surprise the man then stood up and spread out his hands, and, with a fierce remote look in his eyes, began speaking in a high hollow voice like that of an actor in some dreamy play.

"Come up," he said, "come up, my friend, into this high tower. The endless lake of night is around us and the stars that we cannot escape are over our heads. Look

out, now, where my hand sweeps round over this globular earth that rolls incessantly through space. Over there in front of us the seas and continents curve away: here they lie in darkness and down there they are lit by the sun. Away there to my left and again to my right the cold waters roll away until they congeal in rough frozen deserts white under the moon. On the other side of the world the monotonous populations of men are running in and out of their nests, and building little houses, and digging holes in the ground, and cooking, and making love, and beating animals. The light creeps on and on towards us, and every minute it wakes a tract of sleeping men and insects into activity. They rise; they are rising now, in Siberia and China and the Indies; and as these come into the light others leave it, and others, farther behind, put out their lamps and go to sleep in their beds. In this place where my finger points the people are black, and go naked in small clearings in the middle of tangled woods. In this other place they are in white robes and they bathe in thousands by the banks of a broad yellow river. Down there, look, there are bearded men with red shirts who walk about streets of low tin houses; and up there they are yellow and beardless and simmer in confused wooden cities scrawled with absurd signs. There they are; they stay there; they multiply or decrease. They level small hills and burn forests and make straight canals from river to river and put out upon the sea in boats with sail or smoke to cross from one coast to another. Jump with me like a grasshopper from spot to spot. Leap five thousand miles; you can land where you like, and though you cannot understand their jargons, they will all say the 88

same things to you. They will all have the same eyes and the same feet and everywhere some will be giving birth and some will be dying. You can see them all over this rounded surface, a crowd here crouching sullen under those thunderbolts and another there lying sweating and exhausted in that hot stretch of sun. I ask you, is it not insufferably wearisome? Select any patch and plunge into the middle of them; walk and talk with them and your questions will never be answered nor will you do any. thing you have never done before. And you also, your skin each moment grows imperceptibly more wrinkled, your bones stiffen and the colour fades from your hair." He stopped, jerked his fists, and then in a voice of command cried: "Stand here, stand still, do not move, set your mouth, never close your eyelids, stare like marble, grasp the balcony firmly, look at the ground below and fear it not. If your fool of a heart aches, kill it!"

It was a peculiar outburst; and as the man stopped. Harrison shivered and felt cold. His next feeling was an awkwardness as of one who has invaded some embarass. ing intimacy. He stood up, looked sheepishly at his feet, laughed to re-establish his self-confidence, and then whisked some soda into his glass and drank it off. As though he had only just remembered the time, he looked at the clock; he affected surprise at the lateness of the hour, and said: "By Jove, I had no idea it was so late. I simply must be going. Thanks awfully."

Barnett very courteously showed him out.

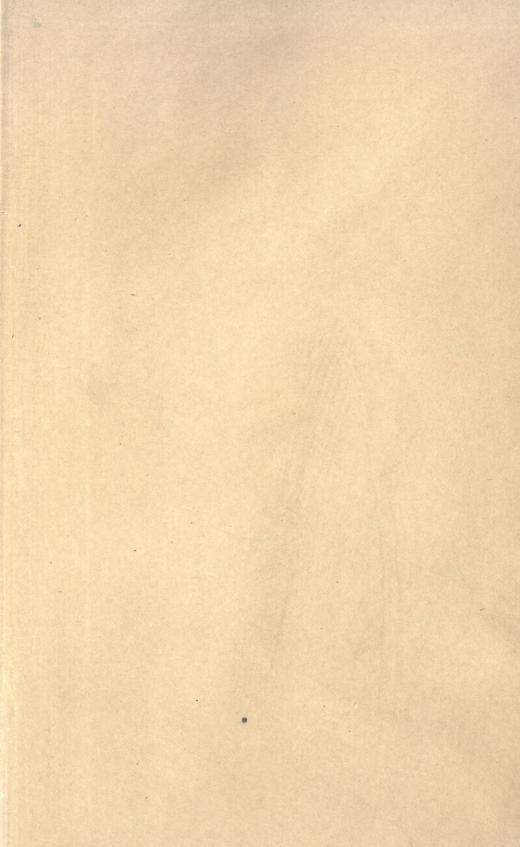
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